

## THE PEOPLE OF ONDO KINGDOM AND THEIR CULTURE: A HISTORICAL SURVEY AND POLITICAL UNDERPINNING

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### Abstract

In every given nation, particularly in Africa, where tribal affiliations are strong, different groupings as tribes exist with their peculiar languages and dialects, and also the totality of the culture that singularly unifies and identifies them as a people. However, with the advent of colonialism, some of these tribes were scattered about and could not be found together on one location again but now mixed up there and then with different dialects and histories. The Yoruba tribe of the Western part of Nigeria is no exemption to this experience and historical distortions. The tribe comprises of different sub-groups that make it up as a people which are again strategically positioned in their respective locations in the region, up to the Republic of Benin, Togo and Ghana as history had it. Among these sub-groups are the Ondo indigenes in Ondo kingdom and the people of Ile-Oluji town-ship, who were believed to have been born by their parents as twins but were escaped out of their abode in Ile-Ife or Oyo, where twins were believed to be forbidden to be borne, by then, and if born, shouldn't be spared but slaughtered unto the gods, lest they caused misfortune to the community. They journeyed far through the forests and settled in their present locations in Ondo State – South-West Nigeria, though, not without some nasty experiences and horror. As agriculturalist Ondo indigenes are, so, they are very creative, industrious, hardworking, highly educated and highly influential in the public – sector. They have a rich history and culture that stands amongst the best in Yoruba land as they are believed to be the direct descendants of Oduduwa (the Yoruba Progenitor), whose own father was said to have migrated from Mecca to the present day Ile-Ife in Osun state of western Nigeria. The significance of this research is to examine the origin and etymological root of the people of Ondo Kingdom in Ondo State with a view to knowing more about them and their culture, most especially, how they came to be influential on the political landscape of their state and Nigeria as a nation. The paper employs the descriptive and analytical-methodological approach in surveying this historical past, with a focus on circumstances surrounding how they came to be established as a kingdom in their present abode and how they formed a political organization akin to modern governmental practice under the paramount ruler ship of the 'Osemawe'. The paper re-appraises the distortions of facts about the people's history and descent by trying to seek the

consensus reached on these, centuries ago and how scholars too attempted to juxtapose on this very argument. The paper argues that the Ondo people of Ondo-dialect speaking sub-group are genuinely aboriginal descendants of Lamurudu, the father of Oduduwa, whose settlement history and culture are empirically verifiable and not strictly mere folklores or legend, except for non-availability of proper records as at 1510, some six centuries ago.

**Keywords:** Ondo People, Yoruba Tribe, Dialect, Culture

## 1. ONDO KINGDOM: “A HISTORICAL AND ETYMOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF ORIGIN”

In the South – Western part of the present day Nigeria is the large and dominant ethnic group of Yoruba. This group, which again was sub-grouped into two descent systems of the south and north, comprising of several sub-ethnic groupings who all speak the same Yoruba language but with different dialectal intonations, has the Ondo Kingdom in its southern part with cognatic descent system. Cognatic descent system is one in which the descent of an individual can be traced through his ancestor in ‘both male and female lines’ (Bender, D. R. 1970: 71 – 81; and Eades, J. S., 1980). This means that, while an individual in the northern kingdom can identify with only one descent group known as ‘agnatic’ which is patrilineal, the cognatic to which Ondo belongs allows for an individual to identify with both patrilineal and matrilineal (Bender, D. R., 1970; Eades, J. S., 1980; Johnson, S., 1921; and Ajulo, E. B., 2000).

Nigeria is divided into six geo-political zones with thirty-six states, as a federation, together with the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, being the thirty-seventh. Among these states is the Sunshine State called Ondo in the South-West, where the Ondo Kingdom resides. It is sitting among the thickly forested planes, with several towns and villages, and located some 300km to the North-East of Lagos, Nigeria’s economic nerve centre and 45km away from Akure, the Ondo State Capital with all accessible ways from all parts of the country (Pls, see, <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2014/09/ondo-people-forest-agriculturalist.html>). Its weather elements are those typifying the rainforest region of sub-Saharan Africa, mitigated by its surrounding thick forests which are blessed with. It is peopled by those indigenes whose paternity is traceable to Oduduwa, the son of Lamurudu, who was believed to have migrated from Mecca, Saudi Arabia, after some sectarian dispute to the present day Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba, where he gave birth to Oduduwa and the latter gave birth to another sixteen sons, among them, Oranmiyan, who later became the Alaafin of Oyo, and who according to descent gave birth to Oluaso, the father of Pupupu, a female child, who went to found the Ondo Kingdom from far away Oyo (Eades, J. S., 1980). However, as in most historical collections, the history of the ondo origin is not without some controversies, as there are three different versions that purport to explain it. This controversy arose in consequence of lack of written records, as at then, supporting the clear and unambiguous account that are embraced, home and abroad, by the Ondo indigenes in the one part and the entire Yoruba race in the other part, including their historians and other scholars, within the intellectual circle. This paper is meant to actually add to what we now have today as contemporary facts to the available schools of thought that have attempted to explain the etymological root of the Ondo Kingdom, its people and their ubiquitous culture (Johnson, S., 1921 and see no. 13).

According to Olupona, (1991), Ondo kingdom, which shares boundary with modern Akure metropolis in Ondo State and Obokun areas of Ilesha in neighboring Osun State forms its boundary in the north and in the south with Ilaje/Eseodo Local Government Areas, terminating at Owena River in the Ifedore Local Government Area in the West, stretching farther to River Ooni, where Okeigbo, an adjoining town with mainly original Ife settlers, now part of Ondo division situates, ..... “While the people of the kingdom, almost in unison rejected a version that links its origin to the Old Benin Kingdom in present day Edo State as being the invention of its proponents, there seems to be some convergence on the other two accounts that trace the origin of the people to Ife and Oyo respectively” (Please, see <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2014/09/ondo-people-forest-agriculturalist.html>, [http://ekimogundescentdant.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&new=article&id=117:ondo-kingdom-landmarks-](http://ekimogundescentdant.org/index.php?option=com_content&new=article&id=117:ondo-kingdom-landmarks-), <http://ekimogundescendant.org>, and <http://irepos.unijos.edu.ng/jspui/bitstream/123456789/157/1/yoruba%20ondo%20prov%20erb.pdf>). According to legend, Pupupu, a female, was one of the twin children of Oba Oluaso, who reigned in Oyo Empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, some over 500years ago. The twin brother, a male was called Orere. Legend informed us that, in those days, twin birth was an abomination as it was considered a serious calamity if they were spared. This time around, the birth came to the king in the palace who could not afford to spare them, but for his royal love for one of his wives called ‘Olu’, who gave birth to the mysterious babies, her life and the twins’ were spared. To avert the imminent calamity believed to be associated with this occurrence on the land, the king Oluaso instructed that one of his great hunters called ‘Ija’ escort Olu and her babies in company of

some slaves that would be serving them on the way out of the empire into the far thick forest, never to return.

Before their departure, the Alaafin, after offering prayers, gave them a beaded crown and an Akoko tree, signifying their royalty with which they were to be welcomed anywhere they tarried or decided to settle. This was exactly what happened in places they reached until finally they got to their present final settlement, where they were welcomed unrestricted and allowed to take possession and authority. Asides, their father (Oluaso), against the tradition of the multitribal marks of Oyo, incised the twins with two long tribal marks as an identity and for recognition in case of future. This explains the origin of the tribal marks of Ondo till date. The political underpinning in this respect is in two ways. The first, being the way the 'Royal Might' was used to escape the mysterious babies out of the palace instead of being killed as it would ordinarily not have happened, which made possible the emergence of two communities today known as the Ondo Kingdom (the twin girl) and Ile-Oluji (the twin boy). The second dimension was the royal identification that portrayed them as royal children and so, anywhere they reached, they should be accorded royal welcome, culminating into why Pupupu was allowed kingship authority without resistance at 'Edo du do' now Ondo by the original settlers of the land, Idoko, Ifore and Oka people. Today, the Ondo people, anywhere they are and in anything they are doing, they are always influential and on the lead. Indeed, empirical facts confirm that Ondo indigenes are good administrators and managers of human and material resources. They travel a lot and are very industrious and enterprising. If an Ondo man/woman reaches a desert, he/she will turn it to a mega city, through enterprising and hard work. In education, they are on the lead, in socials and morals, the Ondo people are in the fore-front, in worship, they are reknowned. In accommodating strangers, they are very kind, but, they could be dangerous and become very very aggressive, if cheated or manipulated (Omotosho, F., Ologbenla, D. K. and Omotosho, A., 2016). In other words, as patient, kind and friendly as they could be, so they could be very furious, when provoked. This informs why one of their deities that they worship today is 'Ogun' (God of Iron), which is celebrated every year as a festival, using dog, palm win and fronts as sacrifices to appease it.

The contingent moved and wandered through the forest until they arrived at a place called Epin, near Gbere, whose inhabitants were called Ibariba. They were well received and catered for until the death of Oba Oluaso in 1497. They then made attempts to return and arrived Oyo on account of unfair treatment by the succeeding king. Omogbogi, the reigning king then, who sent them back to a virgin land compassed about by Ife, Ijesa, Ekiti, Ado (Benin) and Ijebu communities. They later arrived on a second journey at a place called Igbo Ijamo (the forest discovered by Ija). The group stayed in this forest for a while, after which they found the forest unsafe and continued their journey eastward, until they finally got to a place called Epe, a town nearby the present Ondo town ( <http://news2.onlinenigeria.com/news/general/42431-500-years-years-the-osemawe-dynasty.html>, Johnson, S., 1921). They were in Epe for many years and as they journeyed on, they passed through a hill which is today known as Oke Agunla and one of the communities that make up the present day Ondo Kingdom. From this hill, they spotted some smoke and headed in its direction. There, they met a man called 'Ekiri', one of the original inhabitants of the area. As was the usual practice then, the ifa oracle was consulted on the prospects of the newly found location. The oracle instructed them to take along a yam stake (edo) as their walking stick. The oracle informed them to poke the stick into the ground as they journeyed along and wherever they reached and the stick didn't bond with land, there was to be their final settlement (Olupona, J. K., 1991; Clarke, K. W. and [http:// ekimogundescendant.org/](http://ekimogundescendant.org/)).

Pupupu and her entourage continued their journey from Epe until they got to where the stick did not bond after they poked it, as instructed, and there, they chorused in surprise 'Edo du do' (The yam stake would not stick in) translating to mean 'Ondo' till today. On arrival, according to oral tradition, they met Ifore, the Idoko and the Oka inhabitants on the soil who recognized the royalty of the new arrivals and readily ceded to them the authority to rule over the territory, confirming, the underpinning factor of divine rulership, This was how the Ondo Kingdom was founded and Pupupu became the first female Ondo king called the Osemawe of Ondo land in the year 1510 (Please see, <http://ekimogundescendant.org/index.php?option=com.content&news=article&id=117:ondo-kingdom-landmarks->). Thereafter, the people enlarged into a big empire with other established settlements like Igbindo, Igbado, Ilu-nla, Odigbo, Ajue, Igunshin just to name a few, but, however left Epe their spiritual source for all rituals and festivals, where they paid pilgrimages to perform different kinds of rituals and prayers. Till date, history has it that, even when any Osemawe dies, his/her head is usually buried at Epe, the original town of Ondo, while the rest of the body is buried in Ondo Kingdom, signifying (Orisun) that is 'source' and hence a political spectrum (Johnson, S., 1921; Olupona, J. K., 1991; Bascou, W. K., 1965). Politically now, Epe became a spiritual headquarter and the Osemawe palace in Ondo township became the governing throne. For the twin brother, Orere, a historical account had it that he (Orere) unlike Pupupu, now a king, journeyed a little farther from Ondo to settle in a place called Ile-Oluji (the land of 'Olu' who never woke up again) and became its first traditional ruler. Till today, the word/name Orere

is among the pedigree of the Olu of Ile-Oluji, which shares same tradition and history with his Ondo sister Pupupu, a town of about 9 miles away, including festivals and rituals. They all are inhabited in the same state, Ondo, which was established by the General Muritala Ramat Mohammed military administration on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1976 from the old Western region with a capital in Akure. Until 1996, when Ekiti State was split off from it by the Sanni Abacha regime (Omotosho, 2004), originally part of Ondo state.

One other political interference and underpinning, associated with the Ondo kingdom and its people were the imperialist and colonialist interferences of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when pressure from expanded European contact and crises from the Yoruba political wars paved ways for these whites to penetrate the hinterland from the Lagos colony, using Ondo as a route since the Osemawe throne had been weakened, thereby, making the colonizers to establish both trade and administrative links in Ondo town. With the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade and large scale population displacement in Yoruba land, the political life of the Ondo Kingdom changed, especially on land tenure system and hereditary lineage which resulted into intense internal rifts among its varying subjects then, culminating into division and chaos that weakened the throne. The throne of Pupupu was later toppled six years after, in a palace coup by another Osemawe (a man) called Aise, Pupupu's first son and that was how the royal throne shifted from female hereditary to male hereditary till today (Johnson, S., 1921; Abimbola, W., 1977: please, see, <http://news2.onlinenigeria.com/news/general/42431-500-years-theosemawe-dynasty.html>, <http://thenationonline.net/is-new-yam-feast-losing-its-taste>). The Ondo people, given their royal nature, are so influential in their State and its government and are believed to be many in its public service. The current Executive Governor of the state, Dr. Olusegun Mimiko, a Medical Doctor by profession but politician by occupation is a true born son of Ondo Town (Babalola, S. A., 1966; Johnson, S., 1921 and Eades, J. S., 1980).

## 2. THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE AND GOVERNMENT PROCESS OF THE TYPICAL TRADITIONAL ONDO KINGDOM: 'AN ANALYSIS'.

As Olupona (1991:195) infers, ... 'The system of government in Ondo Kingdom is rather an interesting one'. The focus is centralized on the election of a divine kingship with a king status, which is a hereditary one, rotating among five ruling houses (genealogies) namely Arilekolasi, Jisomosun, Aroworayi, Jilo and Fidipote, with an authority partly derived through the legendary fore-parent, Oba Pupupu, who migrated from Oyo and in the other part, from Oduduwa, the descent of the Yoruba race who derived (his) from 'Olodumare', the supreme being.

The next grade of chiefs are the 'Ekule' who number seven and lower in rank than the Eghae, carrying out ministerial functions of the kingdom such as treasury, information, attorney-general and justice, education and other special duties as assigned by the Eghae which they are responsible to. They are in this order; Odofin, Arogbo, Logbosere, Odofindi, Sagwe, Sara and Olotu-Omoba. After these seven are the lowest chieftaincy titled citizens of the kingdom called Elegbe and number 15. Their principal duty is law, order and general security of the land from both internal and external warlords. They of course constitute the armed forces. All these activities are well co-ordinated from the center headed by the Eghae and chairman-ed by the Osemawe. In other words, the kingdom operates one of quasi-federal systems that provide for an effective governance process like Senegal and South Africa respectively.

The 'Alaworo' priest chiefs are the next group of leaders in Ondo. These are largely heads of local, pre-Oduduwa groups who are now in a position of 'ritual superiority' over the newcomers. They consist of Oloja Oke-Idoko, Ekiri of Ifore, Sora and Akunara, the last two being the Oramfe priests. All these titles are hereditary and candidates are elected from the family concerned. (see, <http://ekimogundescendant.org/>, [http://ekimogundescendant.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&news=article=117:ondo-kingdom-landmarks-](http://ekimogundescendant.org/index.php?option=com_content&news=article=117:ondo-kingdom-landmarks-), <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2014/09/ondo-people-forest-agriculturalist.html>). In the institutional structure and government process of Ondo, the women are also highly formidable and influential with their own structure appearing like their male counterparts, playing prominent roles like the installation of a new Osemawe by the 'Lobun' the head of the market and kingmaker. History confirms that no one else installs a king in Ondo kingdom than 'Lobun' and after this installation, she goes to her own tent and would never see Osemawe again until she dies vis-à-vis. If a Lobun also dies, the king she installs must die on the throne before a new Lobun is installed, lest, if not installed, no new Osemawe would be installed. This is the tradition and would continue to be. Lobun is regarded as a woman king, who replaces female Osemawe like Pupupu the progenitor (Bender, D. R., 1970; Lloyd, P. C., 1962). Market is an important place in the institutional structure of Ondo as it is of economic and social significance in the day to day administration and commerce of the kingdom. It is controlled by the women under the authority of Lobun who is also the priestess Aje (god of wealth and prosperity). Till today, there is no economic life-wire of the kingdom and the Ondo state people in general that is not fascinated and strongly upheld by women, even, in modern day

government. They are very enterprising, hardworking and very supportive to their husbands even during wars or troubles. Ondo women are very disciplined and brave like their progenitor Pupupu. They are responsible for discipline at homes, at work and farms, they are in charge of trade and their husband's wealth, they serve as advisors and guidance and they provide divinities. This is why their children are more disciplined and are afraid not to get involved in any crime of disgraceful act to their lineage because of their mothers' spansks, while the fathers remain petters, but highly industrious (please, see 13, 14, 17; Johnson, S., 1921; Olupona, 1991).

Olupona noted, "Once a Lobun is elected, it is forbidden for her to engage in any domestic work as she cannot step her feet on an unswept floor early in the morning and neither can she eat any food prepared the previous day". To this end, she has a retinue of staff that work for/with her to keep her health and she is to be catered for, for the rest of her life without working aside from royal assignment and market supervision by 'orders'. The women have a council like their male counterpart comprising Lisa-Lobun, Jomu-Lobun, Orangun-Lobun, Sasere-Lobun and Adafin. Asides, there are other female chiefs of lower grades and they include Odofofin-Lobun, Ogede-Lobun, Sama-Lobun and Awoye-Lobun. The Eghae has the responsibility of selecting Lobun while the high female chiefs elect the other female chiefs. Such appointments are approved by the Osemawe through Chief Sasere.

The Ondo people are also organized into a social structure of clannish system of compound life where the eldest son is the head of the home and his wife (ves) remain mothers for the remaining boys in the family until that time they are old enough to marry. If the eldest dies, the most-senior boy of his own eldest son could take-over the wives for marriage, even though, he too already has his own wife(ves), just purposely to provide care for the women and their children, again, should such women still want to give birth, they have someone to impregnate them. So, life continues invariably. Indeed, in those days, this culture cuts across all Yoruba race until modernity stopped most of these beliefs and practices. The social institutional lineages also play prime functions in the government process of the kingdom as they offer forums for home discipline and recruitments for major public functions.

### 3. CULTURAL VALUES OF THE ONDO PEOPLE IN ONDO KINGDOM

The Ondo people are also blessed with rich culture of various brands like festival celebrations, ritual marriages, rites performance as mentioned already, drumming and dancing, arts and crafts like blacksmithing, clothes'dyeing called 'Aso Adire', dressing, funerals, tribal marks, cultism, ancestral worships and traditional sacrifices, all of which are incorporated in their African Traditional Religion. Prominent among these festivals are the Ogun festivals (god of iron) celebrated between the months of August and September every year. According to Olupona, the preparation for the festival commences 17days before the actual Ogun day at the appearance of the new moon, with spectrum of rituals performed to welcome and appease the god of iron, with the use of 'upe', a long gourd trumpet blown early in the morning of the ceremony day in the house of Ayadi, the ritual specialist of Ogun public worship (Olupona, J. K., 1991; Bascom, 1965). Such trumpeting lasts seven days, believed to be very symbolic. The festival involves many stages this research is not opportune to provide due to limitation of study. The festival attracts eminent sons and daughters of the kingdom to Ondo to grace it as an honor, also for blessing and protection. Today, the festival has drawn in government's attention with its officials attending the celebrations, portending official recognitions of the rituals and the significance to economy and and the soci-political life of the state in a broad sense. For example, we often see government ministers, commissioners especially those of culture and tourism, information and culture and National Orientation, Chieftaincy affairs and even the state governors attending in person. The festival, hence, by implication, provides a good forum for political gatherings for sensitization and mobilization.

When Ayadi ushers Ogun in (the god), he must sacrifice dogs (aja) and tortoise (aghon) which some other Yoruba called 'ljapa', and pour libations at the shrine of Ogun. Dog is believed to be the Ogun's favourite's meat, thus, may assume all Ondo indigenes eat it, but not in all cases. During Ogun festival, dogs are usually mercilessly immolated or ritualized. They are cut once when stretched at the neck with a ritual cutlass or knife and once this is done, it is believed, prayer to the god is answered. One of the significance to this memorable occasion is to help indigenes succeed in their various professions and careers in life, ward-off evils, accidents, premature deaths, calamities and misfortune from the land. It is also marked to signify unity among the people, love in the families, abundance of wealth, properties and good luck in coming seasons. No year must pass by without being celebrated. In Ife and other Yoruba settlements, the Ogun festival is called 'Olojo' usually celebrated almost the same time with the same significance and of course, in the same man (Johnson, 1921). An average traditional Ondo man celebrates Ogun anytime an issue calls for it, particularly, when there is need for a journey to prevent accident, clear the roads of evils and guarantee



utmost safety throughout. He also does to show indebtedness to Ogun, the god of metals and technology to create and sustain things for the good of its own people. Ogun was a man who lived as a great warrior and blacksmith but died gallantly several centuries back and was later promoted to a diety. The Ondo people attach great importance to the festival than other festivals, thereby, making it the chief festival and arch-culture (Johnson, 1921). Major symbols and identity of Ogun includes fire, blood, cutlass, palm fronds and iron.

Myths and legend confirm that Ogun was a chief diety, who lived a great, warrior-like hunting life who used his implements to clear impenetrable way in the thick evil forest that no one else could do, hence, he was called 'Osin-Imole' (Chief among the divinities). As a ruthless deity, he lived in seclusion at the top of the hill where he went on hunting, until he retreated to a permanent settlement, after a prolonged seclusion, in a garment of fire and blood, with palm fronds to cover himself from the community that could not withstand his stand and appearance. He later headed to Ire where he was made a king, hence, the name Ogun Onire (Ogun, the lord of Ire) was accorded him (Olupona, J. K., 1991; Bascom, W. R., 1965; Please, see article in Journal of Religion in Africa 22(33): 279-280). Apart from Ogun, there are other deities worshipped by the Ondo people like Sango Oko Oya (God of Thunder husband of Oya), Egungun festival (the dead ancestors), Oro festival (the dead ancestors), King's festival (Odun Oba) etc. The Ondo people possess significant values like unique monumental traditional marriages which take weeks to complete with rites before a youth gets married in the community, expensive burial rites involving lineage members with drumming, cooking of bean cakes (Akara), palm-wine, preparations of pounded yam and cutting of expensive clothes called 'Aso Ebi' uniform, most especially, if the death involves an aged person or a chief. This is greeted with lots of fun fares and festivities attracting crowds of friends and relations and others (Olupona, 1991).

#### 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This research was undertaken to unveil the historical antecedents of the Ondo kingdom and its people, through a descriptive-analytical approach. The research surveys the origin of the kingdom with particular interest in its culture and politics. The researchers endeavoured to work within the limitation of their study by describing, the origin of the Ondo kingdom, its antecedents and the period of its existence till present, spanning over five hundred years and above (that is about six centuries ago). The study engaged a methodological approach to the political process of the kingdom with a comparison of the modern day states' political systems. The political structure was found to be highly organized, centralized but with some substantial elements of devolution, characterizing a governmental process with many levels of authority, but, with reference to the deity represented by (the Osemawe). The study surveyed also the cultural legacies of the people and what they worship and what laws they keep and how they keep them ultimately. The study has engaged both normative and empirical tools for fact-findings that validate most of historical facts that were used for survey analysis. The research wishes to build upon this by advancing on it in subsequent works.

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